

4th Sunday per Annum - C
Jeremiah 1:4-5, 17-19;
I Corinthians 12:31-13:13;
Luke 4:21-30
Little Flower - 1/30/22

My Brothers and Sisters,

Today's reading from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians is certainly one of the best known and most popular New Testament passages. It certainly is one of the most chosen readings for weddings. To understand the passage, it is important to put it into context. This passage is a continuation of the readings from last Sunday and the previous Sunday focusing on God's spiritual gifts to us and to the Church. However, in today's reading, Paul tells us that the greatest spiritual gift of all is love, God's love given to us as gift and our love shared with others.

I had dinner one night in Rome with an agnostic psychiatrist from Louisville. In his judgment, most mental and emotional problems were rooted in lack of love, i.e., with a person's inability or unwillingness to give or receive love. I then asked how he would define or describe love. Although agnostic, from his perspective as a psychiatrist, no other passage in Western literature better describes what authentic love is than today's reading.

In his beautiful description of love, Paul makes two important points. First, Paul emphasizes that there can be no substitute for love in our lives. According to Paul, no matter what gifts we have, no matter what good we do, if it is not an expression of the love in our hearts, we are nothing. In his First Letter, St. John states that those who are without love are among the living dead [3:14].

Everyone wants and needs love. We are all familiar with the adage that a person cannot give what he or she does not have. Fr. Libert Vander Kerken in his book *Loneliness and Love* argues that when it comes to love, we do not have what we do not give. We have love only to the extent that we give love. At the same time, contemporary psychology strongly suggests that we cannot love ourselves and, therefore, cannot authentically love others if we have not felt loved. In many marriage cases, I read, "I knew my parents loved me, but I never felt loved." It seems to me that one challenge parents face is how to help their children not only know they are loved but also feel they are loved.

Second, the love of which St. Paul speaks is a very practical love lived everyday: "*love is always patient and kind.... Love...delights in the truth; it is always ready to excuse, to trust, to hope, and to endure whatever comes*" and, above all, does not end. This is the kind of love that defined St. Therese's life. I would even suggest that this everyday love is heroic precisely because it is lived every day.

Today's Gospel is the continuation of last Sunday's Gospel in which Jesus found his mission statement in the prophet Isaiah: "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor...*" Today's Gospel begins with Jesus announcing that he was the fulfillment of that prophecy. If there is a practical life lesson in this Gospel, it is how quickly the people turned on Jesus when he challenged them. It seems to me that this is what we are seeing all the time in society today, people turning against others over almost anything, e.g., cancel culture.

My brothers and sisters, January 22nd was the 49th anniversary of the Supreme Court decision *Roe v Wade* legalizing abortion throughout the United States. Since that time, the Catholic Church in the United States has been the most consistent voice for the right to life of children in the womb. It seems to me that today's reading from the prophet Jeremiah makes the strongest biblical pro-life argument against abortion: "*The word of the LORD came to me thus: Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I dedicated you, a prophet to the nations I appointed you.*" If this was true for Jeremiah, it is true for all people. Before anyone is born, God has known them, has formed them in the womb, and has a plan for them.